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# AN INTRODUCTION TO ENERGY PR

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## Foreword

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**Thought leadership in Public Relations (PR) is often not recognised and seldom credited. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), in its drive to have PR recognised as a strategic management discipline, and to demonstrate the value and role PR practitioners can play in any business, is committed to demonstrating the thought leadership and strategic initiatives PR can undertake.**

The energy industry – both national and international – is complex, interdependent and demand driven. It is therefore unsurprising that there is a large and diverse communications mix that services the energy industry.

Whether in house or consultancy, there is a strong network of communicators in the energy industry – national companies, international corporations and regulators – often with a more diverse background than might be the case in other industries, due to the specific and complex needs of the energy industry.

Energy communications is never just about oil or gas or power. Geopolitics, capital markets, international trade, environmental cost and protection, engineering / technology (amongst many other issues), resettlement and local culture also need to be considered.

It is therefore that in early 2018, CIPR set up the first Energy PR thinktank in the world – the Energy Leadership Platform – that will solely engage with the key issues that matter to the energy industry nationally and internationally and create regular and high-level content that can contribute to the wider energy debate in the UK and globally.

The Energy Leadership Platform seeks to demonstrate the intelligence, sophistication and, ultimately, value that strategic communications can bring to the energy industry, with the ultimate overarching objective of articulating the value of Public Relations as a strategic management function.


The diversity of the energy industry lends itself to incredible opportunities for communicators of all backgrounds, ages, nationalities and religions, and the opportunities to articulate its welcoming environment for all, are not to be disregarded.



**Ella Minty & Paddy Blewer**  
Co-Chairs CIPR's Energy Leadership Platform





An aerial night photograph of a city, showing a dense network of lights from buildings and streets. The image is overlaid with several semi-transparent red geometric shapes, including a large triangle in the top right and a larger, more complex shape in the bottom right. The text is positioned on the left side of the image.

WHAT IS  
ENERGY PR,  
WHAT DO  
WE DO, AND  
WHY DO WE  
DO IT?

## 1 Strategy

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To make a strategic contribution to the business objectives of an energy organisation, PR practitioners need to possess a unique combination of skills and knowledge: deep and broad understanding of the wider value chain and the interconnected stakeholder mix inherent to the product. Energy communication is never just about one thing or about one point of view.

PR in the Energy Sector is not just about communicating a compelling narrative on benefits – it is about managing and mitigating risk. Energy PR is equally on engaging effectively and ethically with sceptics and critics so that the industry is perceived as genuinely transparent in its agenda and its methods.

Communicating the global need for energy and its role in alleviating poverty, raising living standards and creating economic opportunity is an important function of PR. With an increasingly diverse portfolio of energy sources including oil, gas and renewables, major energy producers must communicate their societal role as protectors of the environment while providing the catalysts for prosperity.



Building a narrative in this environment is complex, challenging and labour intensive. Governments, regulators, the research organisations, multiple categories of investors, media and communities depend on the information PR practitioners provide and the conversations they lead.

Through this narrative, energy policy is built and regulation is shaped. The research community spots opportunities for innovation and businesses identify market gaps. This narrative also enables the media to hold people to account and inspires communities to become engaged. The more accessible, intelligent, responsible, engaging and clear our narratives are, the better-equipped society becomes to meet demand, support economic prosperity and protect people and places.

Professional communicators must manage how these challenges are discussed both internally and externally, working with other parts of industry, as well as with consumers and governments. In addition, professional communicators can also play an important role as the conduit between industry and government. In doing this, they support the inception of policy ideas which deal with issues including carbon reduction and the energy **trilemma**, and turning these ideas into feasible policies for development and implementation.

The right strategy always depends on context, and this changes from country to country. For example, Energy PR is now one of the most important verticals in the Indian PR industry. By way of contrast, in Africa, formerly vertically integrated utilities have been split up, with some of these listing on the stock markets in Uganda, Kenya, South Africa and Ghana, where good corporate governance and reputation underpin good financial performance.

Against this backdrop, Energy PR can, if executed effectively, help shape the debate on behalf of both the industry and consumers. Energy PR sets the agenda from a place of greater understanding and balance. Making complex issues and technologies accessible to a general audience and cutting through the 'noise' in today's media is one of the most important things we can do, but also one of the greatest challenges our practitioners face. Energy PR is required not only to communicate steps that are being taken, but also to help explain incremental improvements being made, as well as challenges that lie ahead, such as clean energy targets.





## 2 Building, rebuilding and maintaining trust

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**As with many institutions, there is a trust deficit relating to Energy PR. The PR industry needs to consider the wider social impact of its work and the fundamental impact it can have on the outcomes for many now and in the future.**

Similar to many other sectors, the PR practitioners need to become custodians of the message rather than the manipulators of the message. It is up to PR practitioners to educate their clients and employers about the benefits of adopting a longer-term communication strategy.

**Some of the important Energy PR issues requiring intervention are:**

- reputation management
- unfolding the company or industry narrative in the public domain
- being part of the storytelling happening in the media space
- working alongside NGOs and local communities to ensure a peaceful investment/project transition
- building a positive political and social narrative for the company, reassuring stakeholders of its commitment to the overall welfare of the region or the communities surrounding its areas of operation.

This question of trust doesn't just only affect the big energy companies or the top of the energy supply chain. It also draws in all aspects of the energy supply chain including suppliers, manufacturers and regulators. A fuel supplier can make as much contribution to tackling climate change as a heating system manufacturer, and this includes those in the energy efficiency sector, such as those involved in insulating buildings to reduce our energy demand.



The supply chain is complex and Energy PR plays an important role in helping communicate the many aspects of the sector and the role they all play in delivering clean energy and tackling climate change.

Energy PR needs to provide a balanced view of the role each energy source plays in providing a sustainable energy future. Injecting a degree of realism into the utopian view that renewables are the single source solution to society's energy needs is an important role for Energy PR. We are currently in a period of energy transition and this needs to be articulated clearly to all stakeholders. There is a need for more evidence-led and fact-based communication to educate the energy consuming public.

Whether you are a cleantech company trying to explain the viability of a breakthrough technology to the investment community, an industry association championing the interests of its members, or a utility explaining price rises to its consumers, your success depends on impactful communication.

When things go right, the public rarely notices. When things go wrong, on the other hand – for example, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill or small earthquakes resulting from hydraulic fracking – the public outcry is swift and unrelenting. Well executed Energy PR plays a vital part in managing the situation and re-establishing the narrative, as well as building or rebuilding trust with the end user.





The transition to a sustainable, low-carbon energy future is complex: it requires compromise, balance and trade-offs. However, human psychology is such that it proactively connects with familiar and simple concepts. Single ideas fare much better than complexity in a fragmented, democratised and (now mostly) self-regulated media landscape.

Whilst there might not be a single means of changing attitudes towards the energy industry overnight, inroads can be made by understanding the concerns of stakeholders and crafting compelling messages to address those concerns through the most effective channels. This may involve community engagement to address planning consent concerns or finding new ways to hold the attention of a disengaged, disinterested small business or domestic customer.

It is essential to make sure that the energy needs of vulnerable and low-income households are recognised and addressed by decision-makers, representatives from the energy industry, or practitioners working on the ground to help those struggling to afford their energy bills and stay warm and healthy at home. PR provides the tools to communicate these messages, engage with stakeholders and ultimately help provide a voice to those who need it most.

Without these skills, this resourcefulness and persistence, some of our best solutions to our most difficult problems will be lost amongst the noise. Energy communicators create and build bridges across disciplines, sectors and publics: with both new and existing communities.

Successful communicators start by listening to what their communities have to say, rather than by telling them what we think they should hear.



## 3 Community Engagement

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**PR plays a critical role for any organisation as it charts out a course for the firm or organisation responding to the local sentiments and emotions, local ecosystem, political equations, or to sensitivities of the people who depend on a certain livelihood.**

The PR approach itself must be subtle, sensitive and patient, focussing on engagement rather than on confrontation or enforcement, and making community participation and overall welfare as its focal points. Public Relations practitioners need to plan and execute research driven campaigns to improve public awareness about the energy sector.

Energy companies operate across the world, many of them in rural areas. It is all the more important for the PR practitioners to be thoroughly acquainted with the business models and work cultures of their clients, region or communities. Similarly, PR practitioners need to be aware of the challenges and opportunities that prevail in various regions across the world and work on a plan accordingly. In many countries/areas, a political climate exists that doesn't allow for a robust and informed debate on the future potential and viability of less socially 'popular' forms of energy.

In public life, communities want to align themselves with trustworthy voices on the 'right' side: and communities are usually primed to be suspicious of government, business, industry and media. Making the energy voice heard in this landscape is challenging. Dealing with outrage, building trust, maintaining responsiveness and providing faithful narratives require strategic and targeted deployment of limited resources.

Professional communicators must use engaging techniques to encourage businesses to adopt a long-term approach to issue resolution.

In developing countries, due to lack of planning and investment in infrastructure in the past (and, in some cases, in the present as well), crises like power shortages due to unavailability of fuels and system breakdowns are common events. At times there are issues with the entire supply chain where energy suppliers and providers lock horns mainly on payment issues. This kind of conflict is mainly fought through communications, where the companies involved level allegations against each other and try to pass the blame to avoid public outrage, through their PR departments. This also gives rise to some serious ethical issues.

For instance, as India turns into one of the world's fastest growing economies, it is important for this vast nation to prioritise its energy needs in order to power economic growth and increase India's influence in the world energy arena. India today stands behind US and China as the world's biggest power generator.

This massive expansion across the country has often led to issues of social unrest, community opposition to such projects with farmers in rural India protesting against land acquisition, violence over building a nuclear plant in Maharashtra state, and uncovering serious environmental issues which have often led to community engagement with industry players, especially in the private sector, being seriously undermined.

Energy is a fundamental driver of prosperity and market development, although its production is also responsible for 72% of all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Energy is intrinsically linked with the way the world runs and operates, and we are now in an exciting period of change for the global energy sector, when the energy system of the past may not be the system of the future.

To facilitate this global transformation, we need to ensure that there is clear informed and balanced information in the public arena to ensure effective decisions are taken for the future concerning energy production, generation and consumption.



## Conclusion

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Energy PR offers an exciting career path for aspiring PR and communications students, combining a diverse range of issues and experiences with strong earning potential. With an average salary range for a PR Manager upwards of USD 100,000 per annum, the financial attractiveness of a career in Energy PR is not to be discounted.

Energy is a challenging subject for communicators. The mix between its existential relationship to human civilisation, its deeply technical nature and the commercial, political and societal dynamics that it must navigate, make this specialist subject very attractive for students. While PR generalists can operate successfully within the Energy sector, there is a significant advantage, for communicators of all levels, to having broad and deep relevant energy experience.

For this reason, those who commit themselves to the energy sector at an early stage in their professional development have the best prospects for long-term success in a career that creates near unmatched opportunities to be involved in:

- 1 a vital societal issue that touches everyone on this planet;
- 2 an unmatched range of issues, communicating to the widest possible range of audiences;
- 3 developing truly integrated communications solutions

We therefore call on you, as PR educators, to suggest to your students to (re)consider energy as a potential focus as they start to develop a career in PR and Strategic Communication because, as we often say to our junior colleagues, “nothing in energy is ever just about one thing”.



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## Contact

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If you would like to contact the Energy Leadership Platform to arrange a guest lecture or panel discussion please contact [CIPR's Senior Policy Officer](#).

### Special thanks to:

- |                 |                    |                   |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|
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